

Submission to the Second Action Plan

Australia's National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022-2032

Building Protective Factors in Early Childhood
Strengthening Australia's Primary Prevention Framework

Organisational Submission

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1. Executive Summary

The Self Love, Safe Love Collective welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the consultation on the Second Action Plan under Australia's National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022-2032.

Australia has established a strong national framework for responding to violence against women and children through increased investment in primary prevention, early intervention, victim-survivor support, perpetrator accountability and system reform. The Consultation Paper reflects the significant progress made to date and presents an important opportunity to strengthen the next phase of implementation by building on the evidence, partnerships and reforms already underway.

This submission supports the direction of the National Plan and advances one central proposition: Australia has established a sophisticated national prevention framework for responding to violence against women and children. The next opportunity is to strengthen that framework by making early childhood prevention more explicit through the intentional development of children's protective factors.

As an organisation working at the intersection of education, child development and primary prevention, The Self Love, Safe Love Collective believes there is an opportunity for the Second Action Plan to further articulate how primary prevention can be implemented in developmentally appropriate ways during the early years. While the importance of primary prevention is well established, greater emphasis can be placed on strengthening the protective factors that support children's lifelong safety, wellbeing and capacity to develop safe, respectful relationships.

Research consistently demonstrates that the foundations for emotional wellbeing, social and emotional competence, emotional regulation, healthy relationships and help-seeking are established during early childhood. These capabilities act as protective factors that support lifelong wellbeing and resilience and provide an important, evidence-informed foundation for primary prevention. **Recognising the intentional development of these protective factors within Australia's prevention framework presents an opportunity to strengthen violence prevention before harmful attitudes and behaviours become established.**

While the Consultation Paper appropriately recognises children and young people in their own right, there remains an opportunity to further articulate what developmentally appropriate primary prevention looks like for children in the early years. This submission proposes that strengthening children's protective factors including emotional literacy, self-worth, healthy boundaries, respectful relationships, trusted connections and confidence to seek help should be recognised as a core component of Australia's prevention architecture.

Importantly, this submission does not propose a new prevention framework. Rather, it seeks to strengthen the existing framework by making explicit the critical role that early childhood plays in establishing the foundations for safe, respectful relationships across the life course. Investment in children's protective factors complements existing prevention initiatives, reinforces public health approaches to prevention and supports the National Plan's long-term vision of ending violence against women and children.

The Self Love, Safe Love Collective also recognises the importance of continuing to strengthen approaches that address the use of violence, reinforce accountability for people who use violence and improve coordinated responses across education, child wellbeing, health and specialist family violence sectors. Prevention is most effective when it combines investment in the conditions that promote healthy relationships with sustained efforts to address the behaviours and systems that contribute to violence.

This submission is offered as a constructive contribution to the development of the Second Action Plan. It draws on evidence from Australian and international research, contemporary child development literature and the organisation's experience in education and prevention. The Self Love, Safe Love Collective welcomes continued collaboration to strengthen evidence-informed, child-centred approaches that support children, families and communities across Australia.

2. Key Recommendations

The Self Love, Safe Love Collective recommends that the Second Action Plan:

Recommendation 1

Explicitly recognise developmentally appropriate primary prevention during early childhood as a foundational component of Australia's primary prevention framework within the Second Action Plan.

Recommendation 2

Embed the intentional development of children's protective factors as a foundational element of developmentally appropriate primary prevention.

Recommendation 3

Ensure the Second Action Plan reflects the distinct developmental, response and recovery needs of children and young people as victim-survivors in their own right.

Recommendation 4

Support evidence-informed approaches that equip educators, families and communities to intentionally develop children's protective factors through developmentally appropriate learning experiences and relationships.

Recommendation 5

Strengthen collaboration across education, early childhood, health, child wellbeing and specialist family violence sectors to support coordinated implementation of developmentally appropriate primary prevention.

3. About The Self Love, Safe Love Collective

The Self Love, Safe Love Collective is an Australian organisation dedicated to strengthening the safety, wellbeing and healthy relationships of children through developmentally appropriate primary prevention. Our work focuses on supporting children to develop the foundational capabilities that underpin lifelong healthy relationships, while equipping educators, families and communities with practical, evidence-informed approaches to fostering children's social and emotional development.

The Collective was founded by Lauren Armstrong, an experienced educator with more than 15 years' experience across primary and secondary education, including leadership roles in curriculum, student wellbeing and school improvement. Her professional experience is complemented by lived experience as a survivor of domestic and family violence, providing a unique perspective on both the long-term impacts of violence and the importance of prevention beginning early in life. Together, these experiences have shaped the organisation's commitment to strengthening children's protective factors before harmful attitudes and behaviours become established.

The Collective develops educational resources and learning experiences that translate contemporary child development, social and emotional learning and violence prevention research into developmentally appropriate practice. This includes resources for children, educators and families that support emotional literacy, self-worth, healthy boundaries, empathy, help-seeking and safe, respectful relationships. While our work is grounded in early childhood education, it is informed by a life course understanding of prevention that recognises children's development as the foundation for later learning about respectful relationships, consent and gender equality.

Alongside its educational work, the Collective actively contributes to broader conversations about family, domestic and sexual violence prevention. We have engaged with educators, practitioners, researchers, government representatives and policy stakeholders across multiple Australian jurisdictions to share practical insights into early childhood prevention and the intentional development of children's protective factors. These conversations have reinforced both the growing recognition of early intervention and the opportunity to more explicitly position early childhood within Australia's primary prevention framework. The perspectives presented in this submission are informed by practice as well as policy engagement, reflecting the experiences of those working directly with children, families and educators alongside ongoing engagement with prevention research and national policy discussions.

This submission reflects the Collective's experience at the intersection of education, child development and family violence prevention. It is offered as a constructive contribution to the development of the Second Action Plan, with the aim of strengthening Australia's existing prevention framework by making more explicit how primary prevention begins during early childhood.

4. Building on Australia's Strong Foundations

Australia has made significant progress in establishing a coordinated national approach to ending violence against women and children. The National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022-2032 provides a strong policy framework that recognises violence as preventable and positions primary prevention alongside early intervention, response, recovery and healing as essential components of a comprehensive national response.

The First Action Plan has further strengthened this foundation through investment in prevention, improved cross-sector collaboration, greater recognition of lived experience, and an increased focus on accountability for people who use violence.

The Second Action Plan presents an important opportunity to build on this progress. As implementation of the National Plan continues to evolve, there is value in considering how emerging evidence can further strengthen Australia's existing prevention architecture. This includes ensuring that prevention efforts continue to reflect contemporary understanding of child development, lifelong wellbeing and the factors that contribute to safe, respectful relationships.

The Self Love, Safe Love Collective supports the direction of the National Plan and the priorities identified within the Consultation Paper. In particular, the commitment to strengthening primary prevention, recognising children and young people in their own right, improving outcomes through evidence-informed approaches and fostering collaboration across sectors provides a strong foundation for continued reform.

Building on these existing strengths, this submission proposes there is an opportunity for the Second Action Plan to more explicitly articulate the role of developmentally appropriate primary prevention during early childhood. While primary prevention is recognised as a critical pillar of Australia's prevention framework, there is scope to further describe how prevention can be intentionally implemented during the early years through the development of children's protective factors.

This is not a proposal for a new prevention framework. Rather, it is a proposal to strengthen and extend the existing framework by making explicit the role that early childhood plays in establishing the knowledge, skills and protective factors that support lifelong safety, wellbeing and respectful relationships. Recognising these foundations within the Second Action Plan complements Australia's existing public health approach to prevention and reinforces the National Plan's long-term vision of ending violence against women and children.

5. Strengthening Australia's Primary Prevention Framework

5.1 Developmentally Appropriate Primary Prevention During Early Childhood

Primary prevention is founded on the principle that violence is preventable. Australia's National Plan appropriately recognises primary prevention as a critical component of ending violence against women and children by addressing the underlying behaviours and structural drivers that contribute to violence before it occurs. As implementation of the National Plan continues to evolve, there is an opportunity to further articulate how primary prevention can be applied in developmentally appropriate ways across different stages of childhood.

Early childhood is widely recognised as a critical period of development during which the foundations for lifelong learning, behaviour, relationships and wellbeing are established. During these formative years, children develop their understanding of themselves, others and the world around them through everyday interactions with parents, carers, educators and communities. They begin to develop emotional awareness, communication skills, empathy, self-regulation, problem-solving abilities and an understanding of relationships. These capabilities continue to influence health, wellbeing and social outcomes throughout the life course.

Contemporary child development research consistently demonstrates that experiences during the early years have a profound influence on children's cognitive, social and emotional development. These early experiences shape not only children's immediate wellbeing but also the skills and dispositions that support healthy relationships, resilience and help-seeking across childhood, adolescence and adulthood. As such, early childhood provides an important opportunity for primary prevention to begin long before harmful attitudes and behaviours become established.

Recognising developmentally appropriate primary prevention within the Second Action Plan would strengthen Australia's existing prevention framework by acknowledging that prevention is not implemented in the same way across all stages of life. Rather, effective prevention reflects children's developmental capabilities, learning environments and lived experiences.

Importantly, this does not represent a new direction for the National Plan. It extends Australia's existing public health approach to prevention by recognising that the earliest years of life provide a critical opportunity to establish the protective foundations upon which later prevention efforts can build. Making this role more explicit within the Second Action Plan would strengthen policy coherence across early childhood, education, health and family violence systems while reinforcing Australia's long-term commitment to preventing violence before it occurs.

5.2 Developing Children's Protective Factors

Recognising developmentally appropriate primary prevention during early childhood also requires greater clarity about what prevention looks like in practice. While the National Plan identifies primary prevention as a key strategy for preventing violence before it occurs, its application necessarily varies across the life course. Prevention for adolescents and adults can appropriately address concepts such as gender inequality, coercive control, consent and respectful relationships. During early childhood, however, prevention must reflect children's stage of development. It begins by intentionally developing the foundational capabilities that support children's safety, wellbeing and relationships.

These foundational capabilities are commonly described within child development literature as protective factors. They include emotional literacy, emotional regulation, self-worth, empathy, healthy boundaries, trusted relationships and confidence to seek help. Together, they strengthen children's capacity to understand and express emotions, build positive relationships, recognise when something feels unsafe and seek support from trusted adults. They also establish the developmental foundations upon which later learning about respectful relationships, equality, consent and violence prevention can be built.

Understanding protective factors in this way provides greater clarity about how primary prevention can be implemented during the early years. Rather than viewing children's protective factors solely as developmental outcomes, they can also be understood as the means through which primary prevention is implemented during early childhood. They create the developmental foundation that enables children to build healthy relationships, recognise unsafe behaviours, communicate their needs and engage with increasingly sophisticated prevention education as they mature. In this sense, children's protective factors are not separate from primary prevention; they are its earliest developmental expression.

This perspective complements, rather than changes, Australia's existing prevention framework. The National Plan provides a comprehensive public health approach to preventing violence across the life course. Explicitly recognising children's protective factors does not alter that approach or introduce a new prevention framework. Instead, it strengthens the connection between early childhood development and primary prevention by providing greater clarity about how prevention is expressed during the earliest years of life. It reinforces the principle that prevention should be both evidence-informed and developmentally appropriate.

Importantly, protective factors do not develop in isolation. Children's emotional understanding, sense of identity, communication, relationships and help-seeking behaviours develop together over time, with progress in one area supporting growth in others. This interconnected nature of development reflects contemporary understanding of early childhood and highlights why prevention during these years cannot be reduced to individual lessons or isolated programs. Instead, children's protective factors are strengthened through consistent, intentional experiences across the environments in which they learn and grow.



For this reason, the development of children's protective factors is a shared responsibility. Families, early childhood services, schools, health professionals, community organisations and specialist services each contribute to the relationships and environments that shape children's development. Developmentally appropriate primary prevention is therefore embedded within children's everyday experiences through safe, responsive relationships, emotionally supportive learning environments and opportunities to practise the social and emotional capabilities that underpin lifelong safety and wellbeing. Recognising this shared responsibility also reinforces the importance of collaboration across sectors to support consistent prevention messages and experiences throughout childhood.

Viewing children's protective factors through a life course lens also strengthens the coherence of Australia's prevention framework. Prevention is not a single intervention delivered at one point in time, but a developmental continuum that evolves as children's knowledge, understanding and experiences expand. The protective factors established during early childhood provide the foundation upon which later prevention initiatives can build, including education about respectful relationships, gender equality, consent, healthy conflict resolution and recognising coercive or controlling behaviours. Making these developmental connections more explicit supports a more integrated understanding of prevention across childhood, adolescence and adulthood.

Embedding the intentional development of children's protective factors within developmentally appropriate primary prevention would therefore strengthen the Second Action Plan by providing greater conceptual clarity about how prevention begins during early childhood. It would support a shared understanding across education, early childhood, health, child wellbeing and specialist family violence sectors while remaining fully aligned with Australia's existing prevention framework. In doing so, it reinforces that prevention does not begin when young people are first introduced to respectful relationships education. It begins much earlier, through the intentional development of the capabilities that enable children to build safe, respectful and healthy relationships throughout their lives.

5.3 Children and Young People as Victim-Survivors in Their Own Right

The National Plan represents an important shift in recognising children and young people as victim-survivors in their own right, rather than solely as witnesses to violence experienced by others. This acknowledges that family, domestic and sexual violence can have direct and enduring impacts on children's safety, wellbeing, development and life outcomes. It also reflects a growing understanding that children's experiences of violence are distinct and require recognition within prevention, early intervention, response and recovery efforts.

While this recognition provides a strong foundation, there is an opportunity for the Second Action Plan to more explicitly reflect the developmental needs of children and young people across the life course. Children's experiences, capacities and support needs differ from those of adults and continue to evolve throughout childhood and adolescence. A life course approach therefore requires responses that are not only trauma-informed, but also developmentally appropriate, recognising that children's understanding, communication, relationships and recovery are shaped by their stage of development.

This principle is equally relevant to primary prevention. Recognising children as victim-survivors in their own right also requires recognising children as participants in prevention in ways that are appropriate to their developmental stage. As outlined in the previous section, this begins during early childhood through the intentional development of children's protective factors. Viewing prevention as a developmental continuum ensures that children are engaged in ways that are meaningful, age-appropriate and responsive to their changing capacities over time.

The same developmental lens that informs primary prevention should also shape Australia's approach to early intervention, response and recovery. Children do not experience or recover from violence in the same ways as adults, and their support needs extend beyond crisis responses alone. Recovery is influenced by the quality of children's everyday relationships and environments, including families, early childhood settings, schools, health services and communities. Recognising these broader developmental contexts supports more coordinated responses that promote children's long-term safety, wellbeing and healthy development.

Further embedding children's perspectives throughout the Second Action Plan would reinforce the National Plan's recognition of children as victim-survivors in their own right while strengthening the integration of prevention, early intervention, response and recovery across childhood and adolescence. It would also support greater consistency across policy and practice by recognising that children's developmental needs should inform every stage of Australia's response to family, domestic and sexual violence.

5.4 Supporting Evidence-Informed Implementation

Recognising developmentally appropriate primary prevention within the Second Action Plan would also benefit from a clear focus on evidence-informed implementation. Translating policy into practice requires more than shared objectives; it requires a common understanding of how prevention can be delivered in ways that are appropriate to children's developmental stage and consistent across the settings in which children learn and grow.

For early childhood educators, teachers, families and other professionals working with children, developmentally appropriate primary prevention is not a standalone program delivered at a single point in time. Rather, it is embedded within everyday interactions, learning experiences and relationships that intentionally support children's social, emotional and relational development. This includes creating environments in which children develop emotional literacy, self-worth, healthy boundaries, empathy, communication skills and confidence to seek help, while experiencing relationships characterised by safety, trust and respect.

Supporting this work requires access to evidence-informed approaches that translate research and policy into practical, developmentally appropriate strategies. Evidence-informed implementation gives practitioners greater confidence by translating broad prevention objectives into clear, developmentally appropriate practice. While flexibility is important to reflect local contexts and the diverse needs of children and communities, a shared evidence base promotes greater consistency across sectors and strengthens confidence among those responsible for supporting children's development. It also reinforces that primary prevention is not the responsibility of a single profession or service system, but a shared commitment across education, early childhood, health, child wellbeing and specialist family violence sectors.

Evidence-informed implementation should also recognise that prevention is strengthened when children experience consistent messages and relationships across the environments in which they live, learn and grow. Alignment between families, educators, community organisations and services helps reinforce the protective factors that underpin children's safety, wellbeing and healthy relationships. This reflects the broader public health approach of the National Plan, recognising that sustainable prevention is achieved through coordinated action across systems rather than isolated initiatives.

Supporting evidence-informed implementation would strengthen the Second Action Plan by providing greater clarity about how developmentally appropriate primary prevention can be translated into everyday practice. It would help ensure that the principles underpinning Australia's prevention framework are reflected consistently across children's experiences, creating stronger connections between policy, evidence and implementation.

5.5 Strengthening Cross-Sector Collaboration

The National Plan recognises that ending violence against women and children requires coordinated action across governments, systems and communities. This principle is equally important for developmentally appropriate primary prevention during early childhood. Children's development is shaped through their everyday experiences across families, early childhood services, schools, health services, community organisations and specialist family violence services. Supporting children's safety, wellbeing and healthy relationships therefore requires collaboration across the systems that influence their development.

This collaboration is not about creating new responsibilities for individual sectors. Rather, it is about strengthening shared understanding and improving alignment across existing systems. Education, early childhood, health, child wellbeing and specialist family violence sectors each contribute distinct expertise while sharing a common commitment to children's safety, wellbeing and healthy development. Greater collaboration can help ensure that children experience consistent messages, supportive relationships and developmentally appropriate opportunities to build the protective factors that underpin lifelong safety and wellbeing.

Strengthening collaboration also supports more effective implementation of the National Plan across the life course. When sectors work from a shared understanding of developmentally appropriate primary prevention, policy, practice and service delivery become more connected and mutually reinforcing. This creates stronger pathways between prevention, early intervention, response and recovery while recognising that children's developmental needs remain central at every stage.

Reflecting this collaborative approach within the Second Action Plan would reinforce the shared responsibility for preventing violence against women and children. It would support greater consistency across policy and practice while strengthening the integration of early childhood, education, health, child wellbeing and specialist family violence systems within Australia's broader prevention framework.

6. Conclusion

Australia has established a strong national framework for preventing family, domestic and sexual violence through the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022-2032. The Second Action Plan provides an important opportunity to build on these foundations by further strengthening the role of developmentally appropriate primary prevention during early childhood.

This submission has argued that prevention begins long before children are able to engage with concepts such as respectful relationships, gender equality, consent and coercive control. It begins through the intentional development of the foundational capabilities that support children's safety, wellbeing and healthy relationships. Recognising children's protective factors as the earliest developmental expression of primary prevention provides greater clarity about how the National Plan's prevention objectives can be realised during the early years while remaining fully aligned with Australia's existing public health approach.

The submission has also highlighted the importance of recognising children and young people as victim-survivors in their own right, supporting evidence-informed implementation, and strengthening collaboration across the systems that influence children's development. Together, these approaches reinforce a prevention framework that is developmentally appropriate, evidence-informed and coherent across the life course.

The Self Love, Safe Love Collective welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the development of the Second Action Plan and commends the Australian Government for its continued leadership in preventing family, domestic and sexual violence. We respectfully submit that explicitly recognising developmentally appropriate primary prevention during early childhood, and the intentional development of children's protective factors, would strengthen the implementation of the National Plan while supporting a more integrated and consistent approach to prevention across childhood, adolescence and adulthood.

Children's protective factors are not separate from primary prevention; they are its earliest developmental expression. By making more explicit how prevention begins during the earliest years of life, the Second Action Plan can strengthen not only Australia's response to violence, but the developmental foundations that help prevent violence from occurring in the first place.

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